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ECONOMY AND NAVAL PERSONNEL

BY ARCHIBALD DOUGLAS TURNBULL

At a time when a great advance toward the highly-desirable end of world-peace has just been made, it may be held to be a mistake to speak of weapons. Military men, diplomatists, statesmen, and—potential masters of all three—the peoples of the world, agree that the Washington Conference has accomplished more than all it sought to do. Most of us believe that a great rent has been torn in the war-cloud which hung over the Pacific and that, with the sweeping naval treaty almost certain of ratification by the Powers concerned, the race for naval supremacy is no longer to be run. Yet, for this very reason, it seems not amiss to urge that enthusiasm be not permitted to carry us to unwise extremes. Because an immediate menace has happily been removed by open and straightforward negotiation is not a reason for believing that no other menace will ever come, or that national defense should become a mere matter of splendid memory. In this respect, the Navy is still a fit subject for careful consideration.

At this writing, it appears that there exists in Congress a sentiment which favors largely reducing the naval personnel. In view of the proposed scrapping of certain vessels and leaving others unfinished, such low figures as thirty-five or fifty thousand have been suggested as adequate for the future enlisted strength. It is argued that such a cut will carry out the “spirit” of the treaty of limitation, as well as bring about a commendable saving of public moneys. But the treaty makes no such implication; while, as for the saving, there would, in the end, be none. We must have learned with fair thoroughness what it costs to have a theoretical instead of a practical Fleet, just as we learned what it means to have a political, rather than a national, administration of it. Will it be necessary to go through the pages of that lesson again?

When the Navy's morale was first attacked, in 1913, there were few who believed that any real and lasting harm could be done. Most of us have changed our minds since then. Similarly, it was not generally realized how hard it would be to recover from over-rapid, political demobilization following immediately after the signing of the Armistice. Even when the personnel was reduced to 106,000 enlisted men, the situation, while admittedly very difficult, was not considered dangerous. But no one, intimately concerned, hesitates to say that it is now time to call a halt.

The eighteen battleships which we propose to retain will be comparatively up-to-date; it will not do to provide them with insufficient crews, even in peace time. Long experience with half-manned ships has proved that they soon lose the fight for mechanical upkeep and rapidly become so much dead weight. Further, with each step in the deterioration of material there comes a corresponding drop in morale. Men will attempt double or treble work for only a limited time; after that, half-hearted, useless drudgery accomplishes nothing. In turn, the loss of spirit results in more rapid material decay. While the present percentage of green and untried men stands so high, a forty-million-dollar battleship is not a thing to be entrusted to less than the authorized complement. This we know from the unfortunate result of keeping practically every one of the battleships now to be scrapped out of commission for months, as well as from the effect of maintaining a few with skeleton crews. Whence, then, may we deduce a reason to suppose that still fewer men can bring us any nearer to holding battle manœuvres—something now, of course, possible only upon paper?

With our destroyers, the case is even worse. It will be recalled that it was in the construction of this important unit that we made our principal naval effort during the last war. As a consequence, we had finally a flotilla of about three hundred, containing many entirely modern vessels and, upon the whole, second to none afloat. Also, it will be recalled that the shortage of men, brought about by Mr. Josephus Daniels against the Navy's own protest, necessitated laying-up new destroyers, as fast as they were completed on unexpired war contracts, until

the back-waters of our navy yards were filled with them. To-day, about twenty-five per cent are in active service.

To the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Asiatic Fleets there are at present assigned, in each case, nineteen destroyers in so-called "operative commission". None of these is fully manned. In addition, about a dozen have been converted into light mine-layers, for experimental purposes, while eight are upon detached duties in European waters. To the rest, a handful of men is assigned, shifting from one group to another as fast as a distracted Navy Department can contrive a new plan for a little desperate scraping and painting, a spasmodic jacking-over of engines. The result is plainly to be seen by any casual observer, on any day, at any of our larger navy yards. As each destroyer represents an investment of more than a million-and-a-half, what saving to the public will follow our permitting most of them to go to pieces? If the flotilla is relatively our most valuable naval possession, shall we, in the long run, gain anything by losing it?

In the summer of 1920, a number of submarines were based upon Newport, theoretically for exercise and development of the type. As a matter of fact there were, among all the boats there collected, about enough trained men to man one. Nor is this a character of service to be learned overnight, as was clearly shown within the last few years. A certain submarine tonnage, however, is allowed us by the naval treaty. Irrespective of international agreements, designed to remove the horrible possibilities of the submarine in war,—agreements to which we may all heartily subscribe,—where is the national saving in retaining the type without personnel to preserve, much less to use it?

As to the cruisers, they too have long been subjected to the Peter-and-Paul policy. The *Frederick*, carrying the American athletes to the last Olympic games at Antwerp, was manned by picking up a fireman here, a seaman there, a reservist somewhere else. While she steamed across the Atlantic, other cruisers, tied up to docks, waited for her to bring back their quotas. Similar contingencies since have resulted in leaving those cruisers still waiting. But, under the new treaty, we are to build more cruisers, to balance our Fleet in this respect. Since we are without enough men to maintain our present cruisers, how

much shall we be in pocket if, while building more, we cut the force that must care for them?

The Conference recognized the fact that aviation was certain to make long strides, for commercial use. It also recognized the comparative ease with which aircraft can be converted for military purposes. Therefore it was decided not to place a limit upon this arm for the present, and it is a fair presumption that we shall continue to build and to develop new types. For these, we shall need not only pilots, but supporting ground-forces, not to mention manning the aircraft-carriers which the new treaty permits us to build. Incidentally, the first man to fly across the Atlantic was an American naval officer—a good indication of the efficiency of this branch of the service. Since a plane may be put to many uses other than that of bombing hospitals and unfortified towns, shall we hamper naval aviation by providing that among twenty aircraft but one can be manned?

In discussing savings, it must be admitted that the scrapping of obsolete ships will mean some relief for the taxpayer. But the greatest gain will be that of taking from the Navy itself the unbearable load of an increasing number of deteriorating ships. For this will mean that the Navy can at last turn its hand to the manning of valuable modern ships, to keeping the actual strength up to the theoretical equality with any navy upon the sea. By unflagging exertion, the present enlisted force can just manage to do this with what we shall have left after limitation becomes effective. To talk of reducing this number is to suggest putting back the load which we have just removed—a load which will not only crush down a morale slowly recovering from desperate wounds, but which will also inevitably bring about that very waste of public moneys which Congressmen and others talk so glibly of preventing. Rather than tie up more ships, for lack of men, we would better sink them now. Even a reduction of ten thousand, suggested by the President as a Cerberian sop to the extremists, can do nothing but seriously handicap the enlisted men and, more especially, the officers that will continue to be held responsible by the nation.

Upon the case of the officers, indeed, there is to be laid even more stress than upon that of the lower ratings. It is common

knowledge that the lack of trained officers was one of the most grave difficulties with which the nation, in 1917, had to contend. The percentage available was ridiculously inadequate to meet the emergency. Thousands of lives and enormously valuable properties had to be entrusted to officers whose only training for a commission was a splendid spirit, combined with tireless energy and a willingness to make any sacrifice. Commendable as are these qualities, it can scarcely be denied that they are not sufficient. It has never yet been written how often the safety of a convoy at sea depended in large measure upon officers whose naval experience could be measured in days. Nor has it been fully realized that our destroyers and other escort-vessels, of excellent record, frequently had but one regular officer, the commander. Upon him rested his usual responsibility and the additional one of training eight or ten reserve-officers, *after* war had actually begun. It is axiomatic that the efficiency of any force depends upon the knowledge and the ability of its officers, but, be they never so able, they cannot do work which calls for double their number. If we place a percentage of our active naval officers upon pension, we shall have to pay them for doing nothing, while demanding the utterly impossible of the remainder. This is apart from what might be said upon the effect on morale of such a reward for years of service. What ever result in dollars and cents may be reached by the statistician, is there a real saving in the loss of material and personal efficiency?

It appears, therefore, that we have been wise in deciding to rid ourselves of certain old ships; we shall save time and money by doing so. It also appears that we shall save the money not spent in completing parts of a building programme no longer to be followed. But does it anywhere appear that we shall save money by allowing such ships as we have left to lie in back-channels, unmanned and uncared-for? Had we not far better adopt the alternative of getting rid of them all, now? In that case, we should, at least, know in advance that we were unable to defend ourselves, and thus be spared the mortification of rushing to arms only to discover that there were no arms.

ARCHIBALD DOUGLAS TURNBULL.